DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 841 EC 304 230

AUTHOR Tunstall, Dorothy F.
TITLE At-Risk Early Childhood Children, Their Families, and Our Future--A Beginning View.
PUB DATE Sep 95
NOTE 55p.; Contains light type.
PUB TYPE Information Analyses (070) -- Guides - Non-Classroom Use (055)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC03 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *At Risk Persons; *Change Strategies; Cost Effectiveness; Disadvantaged Youth; Early Childhood Education; *Early Intervention; Elementary Secondary Education; *Family Problems; Government Role; *High Risk Students; Poverty; *Social Change; Social Problems

ABSTRACT

This paper provides a review of the literature on the needs of young children in the United States who are at risk for failure and offers suggestions for early intervention and societal change. The problem is documented in sections concerning: a definition of "at risk," the importance of the first years of life, prevention, successful programs of intervention, cost effectiveness of early intervention, today's family, the important factor of poverty, the role of societal organization, and resilience in children. The next broad section looks at dysfunctional families, in discussions of substance abuse, sexual abuse, violence, mental health, homelessness, stress, the value of home visitations, and family stability versus family instability. Healthy families are considered in a section on family strengths. The remaining sections address what needs to be done, with consideration given to: prerequisites for academic success and collective responsibility; the role of schools, governments, employers, communities, and mass media; higher levels of learning; final recommendations; and a hopeful look to the future. (Contains 90 references.) (DB)

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ED 386 841

AT-RISK EARLY CHILDHOOD CHILDREN, THEIR FAMILIES, AND OUR FUTURE - A BEGINNING VIEW

by

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September, 1995

EC304230

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Prayer for Children

We pray for children
who put chocolate fingers everywhere,
who like to be tickled,
who stomp in puddles and ruin their new pants,
who sneak popsicles before supper,
who erase holes in math workbooks,
who can never find their shoes.

And we pray for those
who stare at photographers from behind barbed wire,
who can't bound down the streets in a new pair of sneakers,
who never "counted potatoes,"
who are born in places we wouldn't be caught dead in,
who never go to the circus,
who live in an x-rated world.

We pray for children
who bring us sticky kisses and fistfuls of dandelions,
who sleep with the dog and bury goldfish,
who hug us in a hurry and forget their lunch money,
who cover themselves with Band-Aids and sing off key,
who squeeze toothpaste all over the sink,
who slurp their soup.

And we pray for those
who never get dessert,
who have no safe blanket to drag behind them,
who watch their parents watch them die,
who can't find any bread to steal,
who don't have any rooms to clean up,
whose pictures aren't on anybody's dresser,
whose monsters are real.

We pray for children
who spend all their allowance before Tuesday,
who throw temper tantrums in the grocery store and pick at their food,
who like ghost stories,
who shove dirty clothes under the bed, and never rinse out the tub,
who get visits from the tooth fairy,
who don't like to be kissed in front of the carpool,
who squirm in church and scream in the phone,
whose tears we sometimes laugh at and whose smiles can make us cry.

And we pray for those
whose nightmares come in the daytime,
who will eat anything,
who have never seen a dentist,
who aren't spoiled by anybody,
who go to bed hungry and cry themselves to sleep,
who live and move, but have no being.

We pray for children who want to be carried and for those who must,
for those we never give up on and for those who don't get a second chance,
for those we smother....and for those
who will grab the hand of anyone kind enough to offer it.

From "Comfortable Words," Parish News from the Church of the Holy Comforter, 320 East Davis Street, Burlington, NC.

AT-RISK EARLY CHILDHOOD CHILDREN, THEIR FAMILIES, AND OUR FUTURE -- A BEGINNING VIEW

I. Definition of At-Risk

We in America seem to be "breeding" a large percentage of children who can be defined as "at-risk". These are the children who are not successful in our school systems for one reason or another. They also are not successful in our society. What is happening to our children in this very wealthy country?

Powers (1989) has compiled a list of students who may be at-risk. Obvious early childhood at-risk students are those who have disruptive behaviors, come from very unstable homes, are behind in school, and live in foster homes or abusive homes. Not so obvious are at-risk students who come from poor families, who are very quiet, withdrawn, not accepted by their peers, and feel they do not belong at school. Also at-risk are those students who have limited English proficiency, have low self-esteem, and have parents or siblings who did not finish school. Schools would list at-risk students as those who exhibit low ability, have low grades, cannot read, are frequently absent or tardy, cannot work well in structured environments, and have poor communication with the school.

Magid and McKelvey (1987) says we are breeding children in America who have antisocial personality disorders. These children are psychopaths who have never bonded properly with

anyone in their crucial first two years of life. Such children are said to be unattached and therefore unable to give and receive affection. A bond of trust between a nurturing caregiver and the child is crucial to infants and toddlers if they are to develop a sense of trust in others.

Bronfenbrenner (1986) says that some children living with two working parents sense the stress and external havoc that is produced. The external havoc then may become internalized for both parents and children. As a result of this process, children tend to become insecure and this may lead to alienation. Children who have no parents to support them tend to seek reliance with their peer groups. Since adolescence peer groups tend to emphasize immediate gratification, it leads to further alienation.

Hewlett (1991) says there are two powerful trends coming in the next decade. One trend is the widespread deterioration in the life prospects of children. The second trend is the worker and skill shortages. Both of these trends will have an enormous effect on the United States as it enters the twenty-first century. Both trends directly affect at-risk students.

At a time in their life when they need the most help, children in America are being neglected. They are less healthy, less safe, and less prepared for life now than in the last twenty years (Select Committee on Children, Youth and Families 1989). We are, indeed, a nation at risk.

We must remember to use the term "at-risk" with caution.

Most programs that provide intervention for such children acknowledge that the children must be identified. However, we should remember several points. Risk is not static and linear. Both children and their environments are in a constant state of flux. The implications of this are that standardized tests should be only one factor in determining a child's eligibility for available programs. Test scores do not always effectively predict children at-risk; therefore, the implications are that such factors as self-esteem, motivation, and temperament can affect test scores. Children develop inside an ecological or environmental context and not as isolated entities; the implication is to make sure the context is evaluated. Cold, non-responsive teachers, inappropriate curriculums, etc., must be considered. Please keep in mind to apply the label "at-risk" judiciously (Hrncir and Eisenhart 1991)!

There are no test instruments, unfortunately, that can predict at-risk learners at an early age. A better indicator is the race and educational status of the mother, the child's gender, and the socio-economic background (Rogers 1991).

II. The Importance of the First Years of Life

We cannot consider "at-risk" preschoolers without considering their parents. The importance of the parent's role in raising children was re-emphasized in the 1980s. Parents should be made aware just how important a job they have in raising their children.

Parents control 87% of students' awake time. Home curriculum and attitudes predict school success twice as well as do socio-economic status in families. Therefore, the education and positive attitudes of the parent are very necessary when working with at-risk students (Walberg 1984). Ginsburg and Hanson (1985) state that if parents convey to their children that they think learning is important, their children will be more successful. If parents also believe in hard work and responsibility, their children will be less likely to drop out of school.

Some people think literacy development may begin at birth. We know that knowledge already acquired from the home environment is what children bring to school for early reading and writing experiences. Social settings such as parent-child interactions help develop literacy. Adults, and especially parents, are indeed models for literacy because they demonstrate their own use of books and print (Morrow 1991).

What happens in the first two years of life to a child will imprint that child as an adult. Faulty infant attachment in these critical two years may lead to children without a conscience (Maqid and McKelvey 1987).

III. What about Prevention?

Prevention, of course, is the best answer to at-risk children. One such tool is quality child care, according to

Helen Kleinberg of the California Children's Service Commission. It is a valued support system for parents and teaches parents to value their children as well as offering lessons in discipline and child development (Calif. State Department of Education 1991a).

Experts agree that 50% of intelligence is formed by age four. The greatest portion of language is mastered by age three. These facts show the need for high quality preschool programs. These programs can be of great hope for low and middle class socio-economic families. The High/Scope Perry Pre-School Project shows that children who have high-quality preschool programs gain a lot: I.Q. gains for at least four years, less frequently assigned to special education classes, less frequently retained in a grade, more likely to become a high school graduate and go on to higher education (Berrueta-Clement et al. 1984).

It is a sad statistic, then, to report that early childhood programs only serve 30% of our nation's children under age five. This includes day care centers, nursery schools, and day care homes. The nursery schools only serve 6% of these children (Schweinhart 1989).

IV. Successful Programs of Intervention

Just what are the attributes of successful programs of intervention? Schorr (1988) says the following: they offer a broad spectrum of services, are flexible, see the child in the context of the family and the family in the context of

his/her surroundings, and keep services coherent and easy to use. Other suggestions are that the caregiver is perceived as caring, respecting and trustworthy, allowing continuity to be maintained by a small team. All successful programs will find ways to adapt traditional professional and burreaucratic limitations when necessary to meet the needs of those they serve. The professionals are also able to redefine their roles, if it is deemed necessary. Koos (1946) says we should keep in mind that the family with individual and diverse interests and no adequate organizations will suffer more frequently, for a longer time, and with a greater degree of permanent damage. People should be accepted at their own level of need.

V. Early Intervention Is Cost-Effective

Early intervention saves money. In fact, it is very cost-effective. Every $1 spent on prenatal care saves $3.38 later for medical cost for low birth weight infants. Every $1 spent on preschool education saves from $3 to $6 later in remedial education, welfare, and crime control. Every $1 spent by the Federal Childhood Immunization Program saves $10 in later medical costs (U.S. General Accounting Office 1990). Eighty percent of prison inmates in U.S. are high school dropouts. It will cost the taxpayer about $24,000 per year to keep the inmate in jail for one year. This should certainly be another incentive for early intervention (Salyers 1991).

VI. The Family of Today

If 70% of our nation's children are still in the care of their parents full time we need to take a look at what comprises a "family" today. As of 1985, only 7% of today's families were "traditional" with father, mother, and two school-age children. Increasingly, the "family" may be one-parent (by divorce or death), single and/or never-married parent, gay/lesbian parent, adoptive parent, step-parent, foster parent, homeless parent, migrant parent and/or adolescent parent.

Also, the U.S. Census Bureau predicts that more than half of all mothers will be in the work force soon. In 1990, the number of children under age six was around 23 million, a 17% increase from 1980. In 1990, 5.8 million of these children lived in poverty. Unfortunately, minority children are disproportionately represented in poverty statistics (Geiger 1991). They also are disproportionately represented in at-risk children statistics.

VII. Poverty Is the Biggest Factor

Increasing poverty in the American family is its number one problem. One of every five children is poor. For black children, one of every two is poor (Stern 1987). For Hispanic children, 40% are poor (Geiger). More than 55% of all black children born in the U.S. today are born to single, primarily adolescent, lower socio-economic mothers (Edelman

1987).

Norton (1990) asserts that black children are losing ground in America. Those from inner cities have a higher rate of infant mortality and illness, face disproportionate early school failure, and may be scarred emotionally and socially by family and community violence. Migrant children have a triple burden of constant mobility, poverty, and a second language problem (75%). They run a 50-50 chance of being one or more years too old for their grade level by the second grade; they are 8-10 times more likely to be retained in kindergarten (Wright 1991). Young children should be taught in their first or home language in order to achieve academic success. Parents of these children are concerned that the children will become estranged and alienated from them if only the second language, Standard English, is taught in preschools (California State Department of Education 1991b).

Ironically, poverty was coming to a temporary halt in the 1970s. Only 14% of families were at the poverty level at that time. Federal Budget cuts, the economy, and an increase of single-parent families began to reverse that trend. Policy changes in lower rates of expenditures and more stringent eligibility rules of the Federal Government cut back on the number of children served and therefore allowed poverty percentage levels to rise dramatically (Bush 1988).

VIII. A Guide to Societal Organization

Norton (1990) says we need an anthropological framework to seek universal guides to societal organization. We need to study how people relate to others, how they meet needs, and how they conceive of themselves and others. These answers are dependent on the time, place, and location of the family. Parents cannot give any meaning to values they do not share or provide experiences that they cannot relate to.

Here is an example of how this works. The Infant Development Project: Children at Risk (IDP) research project studied ways that inner city low SES mothers are socialized. The implications are that some children from lower SES black families do not have a structured environment; therefore, the children never learn how to complete a task. An awareness of linear time (past, present and future) is linked to an awareness of change. It is also linked to language and social interactions. Mothers who had developed a sense of time felt more in control of their lives and were more future-oriented with their children. The implications from this research is to teach mothers the need for structuring time in their homes. We need to talk to mothers who will set their own goals. In this research, tangible incentives worked with the childrens' parents as a motivation for them to change the home environment.

IX. Resilience in Children

Interestingly enough, some children who have had

disruptive environments seem to have resilience characteristics. This includes a temperament that makes people around them respond to them in a positive way. These children also enjoyed social interactions. Fortunately, they had had a close bond with at least one caregiver during the first years of life (Werner 1989). Resilient children have problem-solving skills, a sense of autonomy or independence, social competence, and a sense of purpose or future (Benard 1991).

DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

X. Substance Abuse

We will now consider some factors that are particularly distressing for infants to overcome in order to lead successful lives. One factor, substance abuse, by the mother and/or father can lead to serious problems in young children because of two reasons. First, they may be born with neurological problems. Secondly, there is usually a confusing family environment because of continuing drug use or foster care situations. Necessary interactions between caregiver (parent) and baby may not occur. Parents involved in substance abuse may have different priorities than other parents. Cocaine (crack) and alcohol mothers are the most serious. These at-risk children should have the same teacher or caregiver for more than one year in order to provide them with the security and stability they need. A low teacher-

student ratio is also necessary. Foster parents may need to teach the child "turntaking" (a regular back-and-forth communication habit) before language and communication can take place. Such games as "peek-a-boo", "patty-cake", "clap hands", etc., may need to be played for a longer-than-normal time (Bauer et al. 1990). Three to five children per thousand are born with fetal alcohol effects (Nagel 1985). These children, by the way, never seem to outgrow their hyperactivity and impulsivity (Cooper 1987).

There are a few indicators found in research that indicate when there may be possible future abuse. There seems to be a very positive value in bonding to newly born infants. It appears that hours of holding a newborn baby may help reduce child abuse. Separations of mother and baby during the first 48 hours of the child's life puts the child at-risk for later abuse. It is interesting to note that step-children suffer higher rates of abuse. Males are at risk for becoming abusers while women and children are at-risk for becoming victims. Exposure to abuse in childhood leads to abusiveness as an adult, creating an intergenerational cycle of abuse. Such things as status incompatibilities, when the wife has more education or a better job than the husband, increases abuse. Increasing the abusers' coping skills and self-esteem helps (Swift 1986).

XI. Sexual Abuse

Sexual abuse is very prevalent in our society today. One boy is victimized for every three girls. About 25% of the sexual abuse occurs before the age of seven. There is research to indicate that children need better information at an earlier age concerning how to prevent sexual abuse. Parents need to know facts and present them to their children. Unfortunately, some parents do not usually see this as a risk to their own children "because they are well supervised, etc." Therefore they do not warn their children. Other parents do not want to scare their children; oddly enough, parents do tell their children about kidnapping, which is even more frightening. Some parents are also uncomfortable talking about sex with their children. Formulas are needed, or slogans, to help parents talk with their children. For the parents who were victims of sexual abuse themselves, it brings back painful memories. Since step-children may be victims, parents who remarry should be aware of the statistics. Finally, because of the different cultures in the United States, no one program can be used for all parents (Finkelor 1986).

XII. Violence

Maltreatment and violence in the home are to ascertain but one thing is certain - there is a lot of it happening, and it seems to be increasing every year. Some of

the dynamic characteristics of maltreating parents are ignorance of child development, impulsivity, immaturity, low self-esteem, and feelings of being out of control, isolation, depression, and rejection. These in turn lead to less verbal interaction with the child, high levels of disapproval of the child's behavior, and role reversals. Outside influences such as financial stress and the lack of support systems may lead to an environment where the child is not wanted and to deprivation of the child (Bolton and Bolton 1987).

There are several commonalities in family operations across violent families:

1. confused and distorted
2. unequal power and status distribution
3. frustration
4. distorted cognitions and attributions
5. role incompetence in the face of stress
(Bolton and Bolton, p. 385-388).

Studies suggest that 30% of children below the age of 18 months are having difficulties ranging from anxiety attacks to emotional withdrawal. This is presumably caused by hostile home environments. The stability lacking in today's families is breeding insecurity and doubts in their children. Churches, neighborhoods, and schools are no longer psychological anchors for such children. (Toufexis 1990).

XIII. Mental Health

Voices for Illinois Children (1991) state that prevention, early intervention, and family support should be emphasized when speaking of young children's mental health.

Guiding principles should be observed in this area. Mental health is an important part of children's healthy development. The goal of mental health is to help children realize their potential. If the child and the family have different needs, the needs of the child must be the higher priority. Primary intervention resources used may be relatives, neighbors, or friends. Prevention and early intervention must take precedence in cases of poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, and violence. If at all possible, a key criteria should be the opportunity to have a beneficial impact. Communities have a very important role in promoting self-determination, raising self-esteem, and strengthening the community's social fabric.

XIV. Homelessness

Homelessness and the problems it brings are relatively new to the national American scene. Unfortunately, families with children are the fastest growing segment of people who are homeless. Thirty percent are children, most often a mother with children. Maternal depression may affect as many as forty percent of this population (Molnar, et. al 1991). The average age of a homeless child is six years old (Partnership for the Homeless 1989). Due to federal subsidy cutbacks, a rapid increase in poverty level households, and a rise in the price of private housing, our poverty levels will continue to rise (Leonard, Dolbeare, and Lazere 1989).

XV. The Stress Factor

One more thing that presents a problem to young children in America today is stress. It can come from several areas. We are in the midst of the information revolution in America. Only 6% of our population now live on farms. Factory workers will begin to shrink in number, also, in the near future. Pressures on young people are enormous. They are pressured by the home, the school, and the media. Many parents want their children to grow up quickly. Schools present pressures by offering curriculum that may be unfit for the child's age level. There also may be the threat of violence, intense academics, peer competition, drug use, overt sexuality, theft and vandalism in the schools. The media also pressures children to grow up quickly, with television, books, magazines, and records enticing students with sex and drugs. These pressures result in headaches, stomach-aches, Type A behavior, and high blood pressure in younger and younger children. Parents may, at varying times, fear for their lives, their jobs, and their marriages. A common reaction to fear is to become egocentric. Children of such parents reflect their parent's fears (Elkind 1981).

Children can also get overstressed by the following: pressure to achieve, over-programming, floundering families, changing values, and other worries such as the economy. There is no such thing as a stress-free world, of course, but young children seem to be overwhelmed with more pressures than they need to be healthy. Symptoms of stress in younger

children are bed-wetting, hairpulling, nightmares, compulsive crying, and being uncharacteristically demanding or dependent. What can parents do? They can show self-awareness, use management techniques, and use problem-solving skills. Further, parents can help their children manage stress by being alert to its symptoms, setting reasonable goals, and offering a positive example (Kuczen 1991).

Good early childhood programs can help prepare young children in acquiring social skills and the confidence they need in order to learn. Young children learn differently than older students. It is best to use careful observation by skilled people such as the parent or teacher as to what children learn and how well-adjusted they are. Keep in mind that burnout can occur even in small children (Elkind 1987).

XVI. The Value of Home Visitations

The home visit by a parent-educator or social-worker is the heart of several successful programs focused on early intervention in our country. These programs give support and education to the parents of young children (Meyerhoff and White 1986). It has been found that home visits increased paternal (father) involvement with the target child (Suber et al. 1990).

Teachers or other caregivers who make home visits can help establish valuable rapport with parents. They should consider using positive communications about the child while explaining classroom expectations. Examples of what parents

can do to help reinforce curriculum in the home is needed. Explain that the child needs a quiet place set aside for him to do his homework, time needs to be set aside so the child can read to the parent, and the importance of communications between school and home. Parents should feel free to ask any questions. Invitations should be extended to parents to come to school and help or to attend parent classes (Lehr and Harris 1988).

To help in strengthening the capacities of families, the following information and areas may be useful. Establish programs that reach new parents in order to help establish early, supportive partnerships to help them help their children, from the prenatal period through age two. There should be networking for families of older children and home-based programs for younger children families that include support in fulfilling family roles at home. Culture sensitivity should be given to each family. Full recognition should be given so desiring families can help their own children. Assurance to parents that what they are taught will be consistent with formal schooling as the child grows older should be given (Keene 1991).

XVII. Family Stability vs. Family Instability

All families experience external or internal stresses over the life spans of each member. The stability or instability of the family changes over the period of a lifetime. The reactions of the family members to stressful

experiences depend on many interacting factors (Chilmax, Nunnally, & Cox 1988).

HEALTHY FAMILIES

XVIII. Family Strengths

Lois Engstrom (1992), Supervisor of Adult and Family Education in Minnesota, says that families have many strengths. They are listed below with comments when applicable.

Among low-income parents, resourcefulness might be found. This includes such factors as putting things together in a different than usual way (creativity) and/or coping mechanisms that allow for shortages of models, time, money, etc. For example, these parents may make alliances with other parents to fill in roles that are missing. Engstrom (1992) says she is familiar with one small town in her state that started a single mother's group. Soon fathers wanted to become members and it was allowed. This group soon became one big extended family. They were able to do their own networking. This group started, by the way, as a small school project.

Possessing the same value system can be considered a strength. Engstrom said this was probably more true of black families. They had a spiritual faith or belief that provided support for them.

The willingness to share is another strength. Being

"open" in communication and being able to "give and take" in a relationship helps parents cope better.

With different cultures comes a diversity that provides strength for families. The respect for hard work and effort in Southeastern Asian families makes a difference in their children and what they consider important. Another example of this is the importance Black cultures place on touching their infants.

The confidence that "I can make a difference" is especially helpful in a teen parent, according to Engstrom. Having hope and being willing to take risks are also helpful traits.

The concept that life-long learning is needed in today's world is an excellent trait to possess. It helps to foster a "can do" attitude.

The attitude that your word counts and that you are as good as your word is a helpful trait. It translates to being reliable. It is based on trust.

Being willing to ask for help is an asset. A parent can look at his/her own needs and reach out for the help they need. They are realistic in thinking that they can't do everything themselves.

The extended family is an asset because it provides support of different kinds and degrees. Parents lucky enough to have an extended family should make good use of it.

Commitment to the family is a strength. Engstrom said that parents are much more protective of their families

today.

Dr. John Ellsworth (1992), who works with sexually abusive parents for the state of South Carolina, says there are three strengths of parents. The first strength is that most parents really care and love their children. The second strength is how much knowledge the parents possess. The more knowledge, the better. The third strength of parents is when they have met their basic needs. Basic needs are such things as food, shelter, and clothing.

Stinnett and DeFrain (1985) share six common elements of strong families. They are: commitment (the unity of the family is valued), communication (all members have good communication skills and spend a lot of time interacting by talking), coping ability (families can view stress or crisis as an opportunity to grow), spiritual wellness (a sense of a greater power in life; this belief gives them purpose and strength), time (a lot of quality time is spent together), and finally, appreciation of each other. Strong families are made, step by step, continually, in the life process.

Curran's (1983) research found fifteen traits most often found in healthy families. The four most common traits were the ability to communicate and listen, to affirm and support one another, to teach respect for others, and to develop a sense of trust. Next in importance were a sense of humor and play, a sense of shared responsibility, a sense of right and wrong, and a sense of family in which traditions and rituals abound. Then came a balance of interaction among family

members, a shared religious core, and respect for the privacy of one another. The least important but still common were the value of service to others, to foster family table time and conversation, to share leisure time, and finally, to admit and seek help with problems.

Edelman (1992) shares several lessons for life. They are common sense items many parents would like to pass on to their children but usually never write down. Additional lessons she would add are to remember that you are not alone, never work for just power or money, to be honest, to never give up, and to never stop learning and improving your mind. Other sage comments are not to be afraid to take risks or to be criticised, to set goals and work systematically toward them, to not be afraid of hard work, to live in the present, and to choose your friends carefully. Edelman brings up the subject of racism by saying to remember that the fellowship of human beings is more important than the fellowship of race, class or gender. She also says to be a can-do, will-try person and to be confident that you can make a difference. Throughout her "lessons", she stresses responsibility for your own self.

WHAT NEEDS TO BE DONE?

XIX. Some Facts to Keep in Mind

As seen in the literature, we know that there are several prerequisites for academic success. Dimidjian (1989)

sums up the four that are most important. The first prerequisite includes adequate physical care, nutrition, health, medical care and treatment. A second prerequisite is enduring social relationships, starting with the biological family and extending out to communities for an extended family. A third prerequisite is the opportunity to interact with a responsive environment. This includes caring adults that plan age-appropriate learning activities and play that helps to build various kinds of thinking. Caregivers also must model language. The final prerequisite is a feeling of positive self-esteem, an inner conviction that he/she is a person of value.

Archibald MacLeish said that "there is one thing more powerful than learning from experience and that is not learning from experience." Will we continue to lose generation after generation of young people to drugs, violence, poor health, poor education, unemployment, family disintegration, spiritual poverty, physical poverty, and too-early parenthood (Edelman 1992)? How can we give our children "the maximum of support with the maximum of challenge" (Makarenko 1967)?

The United Nations Children's Fund Executive Board (1984) gives two reasons why the children of the world are suffering more than necessary at this time. One reason is that partial and narrow approaches and not an all-out, encompassing approach has been used in the past. The second reason is that there are unclear national policies and

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priorities.

Chatel (1990) points out that the world of work will suffer from a lack of educated adults when it most needs them if society does not intervene early in the lives of children at-risk. Economically speaking, it is an investment in the future. "It is also the humane and compassionate thing to do (p. 242)."

The Report of the President's Commission on National Goals as far back as 1960 stated:

> 'Above all, Americans must demonstrate in every aspect of their lives the fallacy of a purely selfish attitude - the materialistic ethic. Indifference to poverty and disease is inexcusable in a society dedicated to the dignity of the individual; so also is indifference to values other than material comfort and national power. Our faith is that man lives, not by bread alone, but by self-respect, by regard for other men, by convictions of right and wrong, by strong religious faith.
>
> Man has never been an island unto himself. The shores of his concern have expanded from his neighborhood to his nation, and from his nation to his world. Free men have always known the necessity for responsibility. A basic goal for each American is to achieve a sense of responsibility as broad as his world-wide concerns and as compelling as the dangers and opportunities he confronts.' (p. 23.)

David Elkind (1991) also suggests that the battle in early childhood education will be between the need to be economically competitive and the need to meet humanitarian needs. Let us hope we will choose humanitarian needs. Lynch (1991) says that cooperation between social service agencies, schools, and all of society will be needed to help at-risk families.

A commitment to our children's environment is very needed in today's world. Only one in five children get the

help they need and again, poor and minority children get the least amount of help (Toufexis 1990). Eliminating poverty in families with children would cost $26.1 billion. Eliminating povery among all persons would cost $53.8 billion. This last figure of $53.8 is equivalent to only one percent of the gross national product. Poverty elimination in families with children would only cost about 1.5 cents of every dollar that federal, state, and local governments spend (Children's Defense Fund 1990).

Wasted lives, on the other hand, are quite costly. Irving Harris (1987) estimates one wasted life costs at least $300,000 per life. Most of his calculations stem from the high expense of the criminal justice system. Prison costs total $20 billion yearly in the United States (Hewlett 1991).

Parents need support for their efforts and recognition of the contributions only they can make to their children's healthy development. They need help in identifying ways they can help themselves and their children. If parents participate, as in decisions made, they will accept help more readily. All programs need to be made accessible. The reality is that most families must try to get help alone. The base for good mental health is a strong and safe attachment to a consistent caretaker, usually the parent. Naturally, the earlier in life help is offered, the less the cost in human suffering and the smaller the cost to society. State and Federal mandates do not begin to make a dent in the

mental health of children at this time (Voices for Illinois Children 1991). Hewlett (1991) states there is a critical first three days period after the birth of a baby when the father needs to attach to his child. This is called "engrossment" and helps the father cement to his child. We need to give fathers time to adapt and adjust to the new baby the same as we give to mothers. Barriers to this critical bonding between father and child need to be lessened.

The devaluation of children in America has been occurring for 25 years. Of all industralized nations, the United States has the highest percentage of children in poverty, 15%. The devaluation of children is being openly shown by not investing money in our children - a resource deficit. Indeed, we spend one/fifth the amount of money on children that we spend on people over 65 years of age in America. The devaluation of children is also shown by the lack of time available for children. This is a time deficit. The time deficit is caused by the escalating divorce rate, the shift of mothers to the work force, an increase in the number of hours on the job, drops in wages due to recessions, and the abandonment of children by their fathers (Hewlett 1991).

Hewlett further states that industrial success is foreshadowed by a skilled and educated work force. The United States has a high school graduation rate of 73%, while Japan has a 90% success rate. Only one/fourth of the total parents visit their child's school in the United States.

We need a massive commitment to children by the national government. We also need a shift in personal priorities as well as a political shift of major intensity. The personal shift must move from personal fulfillment, a "me first" attitude to a "family first" attitude. A sharing attitude of effort between mothers, fathers, employers, communities, and government is necessary. We all must take collective responsibility for the next generation (Hewlett).

XX. What Should Be Done?

With all the statistics in hand given within the confines of this paper, a dash of common sense, and several "guides" to help, I would like to set forth the following as necessary in order to help at-risk early childhood students as well as the family, society, and the nation. The following sources were used in this section:

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XXI. The Federal, State, and County Governments

Racism and sexism in America must stop. The economy needs both women and minorities in our work force if we are to continue to meet the predicted deficit in our future work force and to be a world power. Black Americans make up 12.1% of the total population. However, they only get 7.8% of the country's total personal income (Hacker 1992).

Racism is too costly. The median earnings for a white man in 1990 was $21,170 yearly; for a black man, it was $12,868. Wasted human capital leads to a reduction in the Gross National Product in any country (Levinson 1992). All programs or laws that prevent wasted human capital should be supported fully.

Clear national and state priorities for children should be made. These priorities must be backed by the leadership, time, money, and commitment necessary to achieve the priorities.

In the area of child care:

Federal and state standards for quality child care facilities should be made and enforced.

Training to work in such facilities should be provided if needed.

Necessary money should be provided in low-income neighborhoods so the facilities can be the same as in middle and high-income neighborhoods.

Head Start money should be made available so that all eligible families are reached.

W.I.C. should be extended to cover all persons not getting health care now.

Funding for full immunization for all children needing it.

Extend Medicaid coverage to pregnant women and children when the family income is below 200% of the poverty level.

Expand all programs that provide for low-income housing.

Encourage middle and high-income families to join Habitat for Humanity or other such programs to actively work for new housing.

Provide subsidies for low-income families.

Adopt a bottom-line logic and focus on high-priority prevention programs and intervention where we get the most return for our money.

Expand all successful programs for at-risk children in schools.

Encourage creative support systems from businesses and communities that may not be in existence at this time, <u>if</u> they would help children rise above poverty.

Expand job training for new job skills, if necessary, on a community level.

Guarantee children universal rights and entitlements with a comprehensive system of supports for children.

Provide sex education and reproduction knowledge in grades K-12. Sex should be a natural and open topic instead of a hidden, forbidden topic. Our children need the facts and the skills to make wholesome choices. "The Life Cycle" health course Boyer speaks of may be used in conjunction with

this sex education course.

Enforce doctors who are placed in low-income communities because of repaying education debts to stay in the low-income communities. Or, begin a rotational system for doctors to serve in such communities. Or, rotate nurses to serve in such communities with transportation services provided for those who need doctors.

Support curriculum that supports second language teaching, self-esteem, whole language, developmentally appropriate activities, and consistency in curriculum for children.

Use tax reform to the advantage of the family by: reducing the cost of Social Security by taxing the now-exempt half of the benefit and raising the retirement age, make military and civil service pension self-supporting, redistribute the tax burden so more is paid in the form of income tax and less is paid in the form of payroll taxes, create a $2000 per-child family allowance.

Due to the information barrage hitting us, set up a task force to read research and compile the important facts for biweekly reports to all educators and childcare personnel. This task must be divided into such areas as curriculum, testing and assessment, nutrition and health, child development, technology, etc.

Set up a major marketing public relations priority with a time line to stress that education is important, support for students is essential, and every child is important to America.

Make sure that sound management practices are used in all systems.

Let the state absorb the risk when a noncustodial parent evades his/her responsibility to pay child support.

Set up a tracking system through pediatricians and social services to refer names of babies and infants with a possible high risk of unattachment. Set up home visits with their families for intervention as quickly as possible. These and other at-risk children should be given the highest priority for intervention and prevention. This would also provide a data base that can monitor results over time.

Set up support groups called Unattached Children Anonymous.

Use a positive instead of a deficit model to service delivery. Programs should be based on wellness. Anyone who needs some of the services can use them.

All programs that promote self-help and peer support are to be used, if at all possible.

Trained home visitors have been proven to be very effective. Use them if at all possible.

Provide as many after school child care and recreational services as possible if they promote social, emotional, and cognitive development in a safe environment.

School site child care and parenting programs should be available.

Public transportation that can be used if necessary is ideal.

All resources should be listed and available. A resource center should be in every community. Make available information facts on many levels, in order to reach all levels of parent education. A comprehensive parent education program should be available for everyone who wants to access it. Use a priority list in order of importance so that all levels are comparable. Keep resources updated on computers.

Stable sustained long term funding through legislation.

Promote interagency collaboration.

Before beginning any programs, build a broad based constituency of support.

Evaluate and refine programs at least every three years and yearly, if possible.

A delivery system should be easily attainable, friendly and familiar, respectful of differences, transferable, and adaptable to self-sufficient use.

Work closely with university professionals, public school teachers, administrators, communities, and families at the local level.

Make model programs and environments available to those who most need them.

Places of service should exude a warm, encouraging, and caring atmosphere where everyone is treated with respect and dignity. They should be family-centered, multidisciplinary, neighborhood-based, empowering and utilizing a preventive approach, comprehensive, wholistic, sequential, integrative, and culturally relevant.

Provide a broad range of nutritional, mental health,

dental, and medical services with health screenings and meal provision, when needed.

Creative means of getting parents involved with schools and teachers should be employed.

Help is needed in the area of judicial services. Personnel needs to be informed and updated on research that would help judges, social workers, etc., make better decisions. We need to educate these "experts" so they can help nip small problems before they become larger problems. There needs to be a consistent way of punishing people that is more fair. Stealing should not be equated with the same amount of time spent in jail for a murderer, no matter how many times a person steals. Judges need to know more in the area of custody arrangements in order to make decisions that will help the child. The noncustodial parent needs to have his/her rights laid out so he/she can maintain a loving relationship with the child.

XXII. Employers

Adequate health insurance for all employees. This includes access to high quality primary and specialist health care.

Flexible work schedules and job sharing during the child's early years until first grade.

Paid pregnancy leave for six months.

Paid childcare leave that would enable parents to visit schools at least two days a year.

Paid childcare leave in case of illness.

Work site child care and parenting programs, if feasible. However, the child care should not be used so parents can work longer hours.

Job protection when parents elect to take a leave of absence for parenting.

Family-friendly work policies should be actively sought and enacted.

XXIII. Higher Levels of Learning

Reorganize teaching and what is important. List priorities in order of importance. Have as much hands-on training as possible.

Teachers today need many skills not needed in past years. Assess these skills and provide them.

Allow students to take such courses as public relations, media arts, and technology and allow these courses to count toward the degree the student is seeking. In other words, become more flexible.

Teach students how to be effective politically in order to change models that do not work. Teachers today must be educated in the field of mass media.

Work closely with government officials to share current teaching, curriculum, and developmental research and practices.

Work to provide "real world" practicum experiences.

Provide knowledge of how to forge links between families, schools, teachers, and educational agencies.

Provide leadership skills as well as information on how to form coalitions to all educators and childcare professionals.

Make available yearly or bi-yearly ongoing training to update educators and childcare professionals on the latest research and practices. This should be a free service for all who wish to access it.

A professional model for teachers needs to be established similar to those of doctors and lawyers, but created with children's interests in mind. There is a need for generalists with many interests and the ability to work them together in a complex way. We want a model that can plan and act, not just react. Long term planning for cooperative and humanistic values is necessary.

Oversee the development and training of child-care professionals within the state.

XXIV. Television Networks

Create more children's educational programs for

preschoolers.

Establish a ready-to-learn cable channel that offers preschoolers quality programming.

Intersperse public service messages that focuses on the physical, emotional, social, or educational needs of children.

Ask companies that produce children's toys, food, etc., to help underwrite quality educational television for preschoolers. Any company that makes large profits from childrens' products should be willing to give something back.

Work responsibly to remove violence from television at all hours. Children to whom violence becomes common are a risk to everyone.

Work responsibly to have three to four child-friendly, nonhostile television viewing hours for preschoolers each afternoon.

Air stories and statistics on the status of children in your state. Inform the public how important children's issues are for the future of the state and the nation.

Air programs that serve children to report on conditions in which so many children struggle to survive and learn.

XXV. Communities and Neighborhoods

Have available playgrounds, indoors and outdoors, for children of all ages. This is especially needed in urban areas.

Libraries, museums, grocery stores, hospitals, zoos, etc., should have programs available for preschoolers. Free visits by preschoolers to such places should be encouraged.

The primary care physician can help to reduce the bonding crisis in the United States. The community needs to keep him informed with the latest research and make sure he does something positive with the information to help parents who are at high risk about bonding with their children. He may want to refer parents to a support group with educational information and activities to help in this area for the parents.

Hospitals should see to it that early bonding is not interfered with. The bonding is more important for parents and their babies than many medical procedures.

Help strengthen families with support groups. Help people prepare to be parents and teach them the value of prenatal bonding. Be aware of characteristics of unbonded children and parents and set up support groups. Parents Anonymous, foster grandparents or parent aides, family-support services for counseling, and/or other emergency help is especially needed in families where violence is a factor.

Establish one learning center in each community, with resources available that are helpful to parents and preschoolers. A major shopping mall is an excellent place to put the learning center. A toy and book library are great here.

Establish programs that bring people of all ages together. Have grandparents "adopt" a preschooler to read a story to each week, to play with on a playground, to talk with, to make things with, etc. There is a lot of talent in each community. Access it and use it. Many retired people have a need to feel useful again. Have community "rituals" each year that are well-planned and developmentally appropriate. A "farm day" where old techniques used on a farm are modeled would be excellent as well as fun. A "bank day" could show what happens in a bank. A travel agency could show an African safari, which would be educational as well as fun. The possibilities are endless.

If at all possible, sponsor a doctor, nurse, teacher, guidance counselor, or psychotherapist who would be interested in learning Rage Therapy for children below the age of seven. Provide training in this area for them.

Circulate public education materials such as State Fact Sheets on your state's performance record. This can be obtained from the Children's Defense Fund in Washington, DC.

Sponsor political candidate forums on the needs of children. If possible, ask other organizations to join you.

Become politically active. Learn candidate's views on the needs of children and their platforms on what should be done.

XXVI. What Early Childhood Centers, Primary and/or Elementary Schools Can Do

Provide a safe, healthy, and nutritious environment for all children.

Teach the whole child. Allow for each child's social, emotional, mental, and physical needs.

Teach developmentally appropriate curriculum that is

well-planned, sequential, and consistent. Children learn through play. Activities should be matched to the child's level of development.

Flexible classrooms help teachers adapt to different modes of learning, needs, and interests of each child.

Curriculum should focus on the "real" as much as possible.

Children learn best by actively participating in activities. This may be called "learning by doing." There should be individual, small group, and large group activities. Models such as the project approach (Katz & Chard 1989) and the Reggio Emilia approach are good models (Edwards, Gardini, & Forman 1993).

Children should help establish rules and maintain order in the classroom.

Plan for respecting and using each child's learning style.

A multisensory approach should be used.

Show respect for each child, his family, and his culture.

Cooperative learning has been shown to be successful in research (Foyle, Lyman, & Thies 1991) to help make children more caring.

Whole language has been shown in research to help children learn literacy with real-life experiences (Goodman 1986).

Positive parent/school communications and interactions should be encouraged.

Parents who learn early how to parent their children correctly are helping them the most. Provide educational training for parents in all areas.

There must be high expectations for children (Benard 1992; Rosenthal & Jacobson 1968).

Allow children to make mistakes on their own. This allows them to act responsibly in the future and to better solve problems. Children must learn to take risks in today's world. Schools should allow for children to be vulnerable.

Teachers should know how to bond with unattached children. This is difficult to do. Formal education for unbonded children should begin early.

Provide for the technology of the future by allowing students to use and become familiar with computers.

Use proven research and common sense to make decisions with the child's best interest at heart.

Have an ungraded primary school, if at all possible and feasible.

Heterogeneous grouping is better for children than homogeneous grouping (Slavin, Karweit, & Madden 1989).

Enable curriculum to flow from one grade level to another in a planned and sequential way.

Remember that many students are learning a second language and provide for the use of the first or home language in school respectfully. The aim is to retain the home language while learning the second language (Standard English) in a sequential manner.

Raising the self-esteem of children should be the foremost goal of teachers. Good self-esteem enables children to approach tasks and life with confidence and allows them to like themselves. Self-esteem is at the heart of all future social interactions.

Teach positive discipline that leads to responsible autonomy. This will increase the child's self-esteem, encourage cooperation, allow feelings of worth and value, help in acquiring initiative, help in problem solving, enable gradual responsibility, help in relating to others, and motivate for change instead of for blame (Greenburg 1988).

Teach life cycle and sexuality courses from kindergarten through grade 12.

Teach higher order thinking skills to all children.

Make school hours flexible for parents to visit. Schools should be open until 10:00 p.m. to allow for parent education, conferences, recreation for children, support groups, community groups, home-work in the afternoons, etc.

Involve parents as much as possible in all aspects of school life. Joyce Epstein and Susan Dauber (1991), James Comer (1991), Doug Powell (1989), and Kevin Swick (1991) offer many ways for parents to get involved.

Use technology to the child's and school's advantage. Children can be tracked easily with the use of the computer, resources can be updated quickly with the computer, etc. Use this data as a basis to provide better services for the child and his family.

Have resources available for parents' use if they need them. Parents need help in where to go to seek the help they need. A Parent Center at the school site is good.

Show vision. Vision is a very important characteristic. All successful leaders have vision (Bennis 1989).

Be an advocate for children at all times.

Be as politically active as possible in order to advocate for children's rights. If you do not know the facts, contact the Association for Childhood Education International, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the National Education Association (Early Childhood area), the Children's Defense Fund, etc. There are many reputable groups with reliable facts and information. Stay informed.

Create a positive and moral school climate. Character education is a must for young children in schools today.

Create a collaborative partnership with all personnel within the school system.

Make allowances for stress in the school setting for both personnel and children. Active ways of relieving stress can be accomplished at the site.

Normalization for handicapped children should be a goal of the school (Wolfensberger 1972). However, decisions about what is best for the handicapped child and the other children should be made on an individual basis.

Use guidelines for leadership. Some guidelines given by Smith (1989) are applicable: trust is vital, have good communications, be a good teacher, facilitate problem solving, have stamina, manage time well and use time effectively, obtain technical competence, do not condone incompetence, take care of your people, provide vision, know how to run meetings, be a motivator, be visible and approachable, have a sense of humor, be patiently decisive, be introspective, be reliable, be open-minded, establish and maintain high standards of dignity, exude integrity, and subordinate egos to the goals of the school.

Focus on quality and equity of education for all children (Birdsell 1988).

Emphasize academics (School Improvement Council News 1990).

Support groups for violent and abusive parents need to be formed if they are not already in place. Violence only leads to further violence if it is not interrupted. There

are many techniques that can be used with such parents.

Site-based governance should be a means to decentralize and democratize educational policymaking. It can be a means to energize and revitalize school systems (Malen & Ogawa 1988). Public education must be decentralized so the school site is the most meaningful place in the educational system (Safran 1981).

Forge creative links with the community to "open up" the school. Wilson and Rossman (1986) found the following to be true of the best schools: they actively recruit human resources of their communities; they use aggressive public relations campaigns that rely on parents as promoters, communicators, and decision makers; they have staff members who are adept at attracting financial resources for the community; staff members invite the community into the schools and themselves into the community; they build an identity that takes advantage of the characteristics of their community. These links tend to strengthen the technical aspects of the school, make the school more accessible, build political support across constituencies, and shape a school/community culture that encourages a sense of caring.

XXVII. Final Recommendations

Work to eliminate poverty in all ways.

Work to eliminate racism and sexism in all ways.

Initiate one policymaking body for early childhood on national, state, and local levels (Dimidjian 1989).

Establish separate standards of licensing of early childhood programs and personnel (Dimidjian)

Share information, research, and skills with others, especially parents of young children.

Surround yourself and your staff with supportive people, but always allow and listen to those who think differently.

Model an appreciation for all cultures and people.

Model cooperation.

Always keep a vision.

Model the attitude that "we are all in this together" and the attitude that "there is always hope."

Model integrity so you can sleep well at night.

Remember that good organizational planning is crucial.

Positive leadership is essential for success.

Have high expectations for everyone.

Remember that it is okay to make mistakes; however, it is not okay if you do not learn from your mistakes.

Establish facts that need to be publicized in a prioritized way.

Learn and use ways of dealing with stress.

Be open and honest with everyone. We do not have time to play psychological games.

Commit yourself to speak as an advocate for children.

Work toward positive self-esteem in all people, especially yourself.

Work collaboratively with everyone - children, youth, parents, businesses, communities, personnel, handicapped, older people, etc.

Be willing to work hard for your beliefs.

Use technology to your advantage to make your work easier.

Be approachable to everyone.

Use formative evaluations of personnel.

Allow for more inservice in schools, government, businesses, etc.

Be creative in ways to accomplish intervention and prevention for children.

Use positive discipline at all times.

Keep abreast of the latest research.

Always remember that all children need a warm and supportive environment, high expectations, and involvement or participation (Benard 1992). Every child needs at least one adult person who really cares for them, also.

XXVIII. The Future Is Not Hopeless

It is heartening to note that 41 states consider early

childhood education as one of the top five issues facing their states today (National Conference of State Legislatures 1990).

The people of America seem to know what is best for them. They are aware of the unraveling of the social fabric of our country and would prefer higher taxes rather than violence in the homes and streets (Hewlett 1991). The Gallop Poll (1989) shows the same reasoning by caring adults. They want educational improvement in poorer states and communities. They also would be willing to pay higher taxes in order to equalize educational opportunity for all students. The public also favors lower class size, after school and summer programs for children whose parents work, more Head Start programs, and more federal and state assistance for those students who have the ability and desire to attend college but not the money to do so.

It would be wonderful to think that America will come to its senses by the 21st century. We could eliminate child poverty with vision, hard work, positive leadership, and systematic investment in proven strategies. The gaps that separate minority and poor children from other young children can be eliminated. We can show the world that all of God's children are precious in His sight and also in our sight (Children's Defense Fund 1990).

As past President Havel of Czechoslovakia stated while in prison, "Either we have hope within us or we don't: it is a dimension of the soul....Hope in this deep and powerful

sense is...an ability to work for something because it is good, not just because it stands a chance to succeed....It is also this hope, above all, which gives us the strength to live and continually to try new things, even in conditions that seem as hopeless as ours do here and now" (Edelman 1992)

Let us hope and pray that we educators can rise to meet the challenge that lies before us. If the United States is to preserve itself as a world leader, it is imperative that we restore dignity to each and every individual, especially our children. Our work is certainly cut out for us in the next few years!

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